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ABSTRACT

One factor identified as vital to managerial success is that of being a part of a mentor relationship. That this is primarily a male relationship is due to subtle communication patterns within organizations that have grown out of male experiences with team sports and therefore exclude women. Among the various barriers women in organizations must overcome is their powerlessness due to insufficient knowledge of corporate politics and the informal communication system. Women denied access to a mentor experience can turn to one or two other alternatives--among them a women's network--but ultimately the focus returns to the necessity for women to have or to be sponsors in order to achieve success. (Author/HOD)

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WO-MENTORING: CAN IT WORK?

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ABSTRACT

Being a part of a mentor relationship has been identified as a factor vital to managerial success. That this is primarily a male experience is due to subtle communication patterns within organizations which have grown out of male experiences with team sports and which therefore exclude women. Among the various barriers women in organizations must overcome is their powerlessness due to insufficient knowledge of corporate politics and the informal communication system. Women denied access to a mentor experience can turn to one or two other alternatives--among them a women's network--but ultimately the focus returns to the necessity for women to have or to be sponsors in order to achieve success.

INTRODUCTION

According to ancient myth, Ulysses was called to war soon after the birth of his son. Not wishing for Telemachus to grow up without a guide, Ulysses arranged for his friend, Mentor, to serve as a tutor. Ulysses' odyssey lasted nearly 20 years, and Mentor became responsible for most of Telemachus' learning. Mentor was, in fact, the name assumed by Minerva, the goddess of wisdom (Guerber, 1893).

Far from being a concept limited to mythology, the idea of having a mentor has taken on significance with a great segment of the upwardly mobile in recent years. People in business, especially, look to mentor-figures for guidance in negotiating the organizational pathways that have the potential for assuring or blocking success. A mentor helps a newer employee "learn the ropes, protects the charge from being unduly roughed up by the opposition and guides the youth through the corporate maze" (Swain, 1980, p. 84).

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The importance for a young employee to have such an interested sponsor is dramatized by Ruth Halcomb: "Individuals seem to need mentors most at crisis periods or turning points in their careers . . . . One's success or failure at such times greatly depends upon whether a mentor is present or not. To have a mentor is to be among the blessed. Not to have one is to be damned to eternal oblivion or at least to mid-level status" (1979, pp. 126-127).

Despite the fact that the Minerva-Telemachus relationship was a female-male experience, and despite the recent efforts to include more women in higher management positions, mentoring has generally been seen as an all-male phenomenon. Halcomb writes: "Men who thrive in large organizations are most likely to have had the support of bosses who took a special interest in their careers. But it may be even more essential for women to be proteges" (1979, p. 126).

If having a mentor is as important to an individual as Halcomb suggests, it is vital then for students of business communication to learn as much as possible about it, before beginning their own organizational management career.

This paper examines the mentor experience: what it is, how it works for men, and how it should and could work for women. Examining the mentoring process requires first a description of certain features of the organizational environment, mainly the fact of corporate politics and the reasons men seem more inherently successful than women in adapting to such "games." This leads naturally to a consideration of mentoring and the question of whether it is a viable route for an upward-bound woman or whether there are other alternatives to promote her success within organizations.

DISCUSSION

During the past ten years, according to Ellyn Mirides and Andre Cote, a variety of social and economic factors has increased the number of women in the work-place. These factors include (1) the women's movement and supporting organizations of similar philosophies and orientations, (2) recent civil-rights legislation prompting aggressive action programs, (3) the changing profile of the American workforce, and (4) the increase in the need for competent managers in business and industry (Mirides & Cote, 1980, p. 25).

Despite all this, most women are still concentrated in low-level positions, away from management action. The 1978 Bureau of Labor Statistics documents that only two percent of all women in business currently hold management positions and only 6.1 percent of persons with weekly earnings of $500 or more were female (Mirides & Cote, 1980, p. 25).

Barriers

There are numerous barriers to be overcome by female managers before they achieve an equal position in management. Among the barriers cited by Mirides and Cote are the following (1980, p. 25):

1. Sex-role stereotypes about women and work.
   Women work for money alone.
   Women are not committed to their jobs, regarding them as temporary.
   Women are not suited emotionally or intellectually for jobs traditionally held by men.
   Women cannot coordinate careers with family demands.
2. Condescending treatment and withholding of supervisory support for women already in managerial positions.
3. Hiring biases and training program barriers.
   Requirements designed by males for males.
   False perceptions regarding "male" or "female" oriented jobs.
   Greater concern of "appropriate" business and social behaviors.
4. Women's self-perceptions based on societal conditioning.
5. Policies, procedures and systems that define and govern the organization and which are not known or understood by women. (1980, p. 25)

Even women who overcome some of the above barriers have a difficult time mastering the last barrier. In her book Games Mother Never Taught You, Betty Lehan Harragan describes the situation: "The vast majority are oblivious to the fact that they have stumbled onto a playing field where the rules of participation are rigidly enforced and the criteria for success are known to all but them" (1978, p. 23). The differences between what people expect and what they find in an organization is one component of corporate politics. The point is, writes Marilyn Moats Kennedy, "that members have no choice whether to play or not" (1980, p. 36). Office politics is a fact and a process. Non-participation is not an option.

Also writing about power and politics, Halcomb says: "Women who've made some career progress find that the roadblock standing in the way of further advancement is not only sexism but the inherent structure of the system itself . . . . Good game-players understand the structure well, deferring to superiors and knowing which privileges go with each rank" (1979, p. 54).

Organizational System

Most men realize that modern corporate structure is derived from the military. Understanding that the pyramid structure and chain-of-command communication is based on a male-dominated military model could lessen the confusion felt by working women confronted with an organizational hierarchy.

But aside from formal systems, even the informal system of relationships in most organizations "finds both its origins and present function in the male culture and in the male experience" (Hennig & Jardim, 1978, p. 13). Hennig and Jardim declare that "what makes this particularly threatening to the future of women in management . . . grows still more critical with every step upward . . . . Competence as a manager requires understanding and skill at working in and with the informal system of relationships in which management jobs are embedded" (1978, pp. 13-15).

Thus, even men with no military experience adapt readily to the formal and informal structures of organizations. They have their background in team sports, and, if they do have difficulty adjusting to corporate life, "unlike working women, they are clued in very early by male associates and management" (Harragan, 1978, p. 41).

Corporate politics and the informal system affect this relationship: "In the nature of the relationships that men traditionally establish with each other lies the key to both" (Hennig & Jardim, 1978, p. 67). When small boys begin learning about team sports, they learn about being members of a group, about winning and losing, about strategy and specialization, and about relationships and responsibility. Women seem to lack this kind of experience with competition. Elsewhere, Hennig and Jardim go on to say: "After years of practice, men bring these skills with them to management situations where they are critical to job performance . . . . As team members, men have already learned the ground rules for relationships among their mostly male colleagues in management. They have learned how to operate in a subtle network of lateral relationships . . . that depend on friendship, persuasion, favors, promises, and/or connections with people who already have influence" (1977, p. 81).

This subtle support system, commonly called the "old boys' network," is the way men in business cut through resistance and red tape simply by virtue of their informal relationships with each other. More decisions are reached on golf courses, in locker rooms, or over lunch tables, than in conference rooms. Deliberately or not, men leave women (even women they work with) out of their informal information channels. That women do not socialize like or with men results in a powerlessness due to limited lines of information.

Writing about such powerlessness, Rosabeth Moss Kanter points to a related reason: because many women in management do not rise through the usual channels (men often begin in production or sales), they lack information about technical requirements on the job (1979). Any corresponding lack in a male candidate would be filled in by the "old boys' network" or by a sponsorship system through which a young man advances by virtue of being the protege of an older, established person (Hay, 1980, p. 36).

In some companies the system is more formal than informal. The "first assistant philosophy" at Jewel Tea Company means: "The executive responsibility involves assisting the people down the line to be successful. The boss in any department is the first assistant to those who report to him" (Collins & Scott, 1978, p. 90). To accomplish this behavior, each management trainee at Jewel is assigned an officer to act as a sponsor and mentor. This sponsor "helps the trainee plan his career and talks to others about him" (Collins & Scott, 1978, p. 100).

Career Development

Gene W. Dalton and Paul H. Thompson have studied professional careers and have described four stages in career development, differentiated by the relationships to others (1977, p. 23). Stage I is an apprenticeship with the primary activities concerned with helping, learning, and following directions. Describing the relationships in Stage I, Dalton and Thompson write:

> Ideally, in this stage he will work with a mentor who knows how to design a study, structure an audit, or analyze the critical risks involved in a loan. He works closely with the mentor, learning from observation, and from trial and correction, the approaches, the organizational savvy and the judgement that no one has yet been able to incorporate into textbooks . . . . A good mentor often becomes a model the Stage I person can follow whenever he is unsure how to approach a problem . . . . These and other benefits suggest that finding a good mentor should be a key agenda for any professional entering any organization. Providing him with the opportunity to find such a mentor is an equally important responsibility of high-ups in the organization. (1977, pp. 24-25)

Stage II is a time when colleagues and peer relationships take on greater importance. The person becomes an independent contributor to the organization and relies less on the

mentor. "This transition is not easy, involving as it does a change in attitude and behavior on the part of the supervisor as well as the individual himself" (Dalton & Thompson, 1977, p. 27).

Stage III is called the mentor stage, "because of the increased responsibility individuals begin to take for influencing, guiding, directing, and developing other people. It is usually persons in this stage who play the critical role in helping others move through Stage I. . . . Often an individual begins to play the role of informal mentor as an outgrowth of his success in Stage II. He becomes a mentor for the people who assist him" (Dalton & Thompson, 1977, pp. 29-30). One writer, evaluating Dalton and Thompson's work, views Stage III as similar to Erik Erikson's generativity stage of adulthood where individuals become paternal and feel a "voluntary urge to help new generations and younger associates" (Hanson, 1977, p. 44).

While similar in some respects to Stage III, Stage IV focuses on shaping the direction of the organization by exercising power. In Stage IV, called sponsoring, "the focus is on opening up opportunities, assessing, and providing feedback, rather than on teaching and instruction." Dalton and Thompson watch these people, note their strengths and weaknesses, counsel them, and try to guide each one into areas where he or she is "most likely to be effective" (1977, p. 34).

Roles of Mentors

Another article distinguishes between mentor and sponsor and adds a third--coach--in describing roles contributing to the development of effective managers. The group preparing this article defines a coach as a "boss who helps a subordinate meet specific growth needs by setting challenging tasks, counseling subordinates, and appraising performance. Whereas coaches prepare individuals for enhanced placement in other parts of the organization, sponsors on the other hand mention people with potential for special or existing openings and apply subtle pressure to get proteges considered or placed" (Woodlands, 1980, pp. 918-919).

Of the three roles described here, "mentors are more apt to be concerned with the needs of the protege than with the needs of the organization . . . . [T]heir respect . . . for the protégé takes precedence . . . even when it means advising one to leave the organization in order to achieve maximum growth and development" (Woodlands, 1980, p. 920). Except for this difference in focus, the distinction between sponsor and mentor as described by these writers is small.

Types of Mentors

In her book, Marilyn Moats Kennedy describes five kinds of mentors available in organizations, with the last most nearly approaching the caring sponsorship relationship described above.

The first kind is the information mentor, a person who teaches a new employee about the informal organization. The peer mentor provides information from an equal perspective and acts as a sounding board. A third mentor identified by Kennedy is the retiree who offers an oral history of the organization and the manner in which it was shaped, providing insights for an aspiring employee. Then there is the competitive mentor, someone in a similar job at another organization, someone who often can provide valuable insights from a different perspective (Kennedy, 1980).

Finally, the mentor "that received the most publicity, excites the most envy, and is most desired by new workers," is the godfather mentor "who not only can teach, inspire, and orient but also can make things happen for the protege" (Kennedy, 1980, p. 155). This mentor relationship is a symbiotic one, with both parties gaining from it. Kennedy says: "Most people who've played either or both roles think that it has been the greatest competitive boost to their careers. The godfathers themselves talk in terms of enhanced prestige at having discovered . . . someone who added to the organization's talent bank. Proteges listed an improvement in the quality of their efforts, and enhanced prestige as a result of being known as someone's protege" (Kennedy, 1980, p. 159).

Among 1,250 responses to a 1977 survey of executives, nearly two-thirds reported having had a mentor or sponsor (Roche, 1979). According to Roche, the mentor relationship has become more visible during the past 20 years. He says executives who have had a mentor earn more money at a younger age, are better educated, are more likely to follow a career plan, and sponsor more proteges themselves than executives who have not had a mentor (1979). Roche also found that those with mentors were happier with their career progress and derived greater pleasure from their work (1979).

Mentors' Importance to Careers

Clearly sponsors or mentors are important to the careers of managers. Kanter finds three reasons for this importance:

> First, sponsors are often in a position to fight for the person in question, to stand up for him or her in meetings if controversy is raised, to promote that person for promising opportunities. Second, sponsors often provide the occasion for lower-level organization members to bypass the hierarchy: to get inside information, to short-circuit cumbersome procedures, or to cut red tape. Third, sponsors also provide an important signal to other people, a form of "reflected power." Sponsorship indicates to others that the person in question has the backing of an influential person. (1977, pp. 181-182)

Kanter goes on to point out, "If sponsors are important for the success of men in organizations, they seem absolutely essential for women" (1977, p. 183). But, they are also harder to find. Because there are not many successful female role models, "an identifiable person to examine . . . woman to woman . . . for strategic help and advice does not exist in most companies" (Hay, 1980, p. 33). Halcomb states that, "right now, with more women moving onto managerial rungs of the corporate ladder, mentors should ideally be easier to find. But the changes that were supposed to help women can, in some cases, be a hindrance. A number of women who made their career progress before the days of affirmative action believe that the opportunities being held out to women today aren't the real opportunities they themselves had" (1979, p. 131).

Whereas some males have become mentors for younger women, this arrangement often fails for two reasons. Mentors often choose a particular individual to sponsor because of identification, and "this process almost automatically eliminates women" (Kanter, 1977, p. 184). Also, "the intimacy of the mentor-protege relationship may discourage even the highest male risk-taker from being mentor to a woman" (Woodlands, 1980, p. 921). "The 'other sexness' of either partner may create sufficient social pressure to arrest or prevent extensive one-on-one coaching" (Woodlands, 1980, pp. 918-19).

Kram, furthermore, states clearly not only that the mentor or sponsor relationship is important to the careers of managers, but also that the relationship passes through four phases: "an initiation phase, during which time the relationship is started; a cultivation phase, during which time the range of functions provided expands to maximum; a separation phase, during which time the established nature of the relationships . . . changed; and a redefinition phase, during which time the relationship evolves a new form that is significantly different from the past, or the relationship ends entirely" (Kram, 1983, p. 614).

Halcomb perceives a double bind. "Establishing a good mentor relationship with a man can be difficult in a society that's both sexist and sexually charged" (1979, p. 133). At the same time, most mentors are male, partly because more men are able (or willing) to assume the role. Halcomb adds: "And in many of the areas where mentors are necessary, a man has more power and prestige of his own so that he can be more effective in enhancing the prestige of a protege. A man's stamp of approval makes a woman a more acceptable colleague or team member" (1977, pp. 133-34).

Alternatives to Mentors

Are there alternatives for women who want to progress within organizations without getting caught in the Catch-22 of mentor relationships? Several suggestions are clear.

Joining professional organizations may be a way of transferring reliance for advice from a single mentor to various colleagues (Edson, 1980, p. 19). Not only are the contacts important, but also professional or trade organizations usually are organized along some sort of hierarchy, and participation can equate to training in management skills (Harragan, 1978, p. 323). Combining Kennedy's ideas of peer and competitive mentors, outside professional-development activities can be a way of sharing challenges and problems and a "rich oasis of information and interaction" (Burrow, 1980, p. 81).

Specific management training can be another real asset for women denied the informal instruction of the "old boys' network." Women need training in parliamentary procedure (Baron, 1980), in the use of leverage, and in other management skills (Hay, 1980). Many independent seminars and programs have been set up to fill these needs, and companies wishing to enhance the results of affirmative-action plans can establish other programs designed to narrow the training and experience gap between men and women (Mejia-Luis & Balkin, 1980).

A third alternative receiving much attention is networking for women, a "new girl network" designed for information, for advice, for moral support--because only other women can truly understand what working women are up against (Welch, 1980, p. 18). Some networks are formally organized within companies, within cities, or within professions; and others are more individually structured according to the needs and connections of a particular woman. An informal system of relationships within, or outside, an organization can help all women involved identify job opportunities, solve problems, perfect management skills, and even "identify bosses who are particularly supportive of career advancement for women" (Hennig & Jardim, 1977, p. 80).

However, it may be a misconception to assume that a support network can be a consciously developed organization. At least one woman feels that such informal communication channels cannot be artificially structured and argues against trying to establish a "new girl network"; "A more viable approach in an environment where women and men are interdependent and work together to meet organizational goals would be for women to concentrate on gaining support based on need for information, advice, assistance, and resources as opposed to gender" (Warihay, 1980, p. 58).

Network or no, the focus always comes back to sponsorship. Ironically, one of the projects suggested for a formally organized network is to start a mentoring program, "bringing in younger women to profit by the more experienced members' savvy" (Welch, 1980, p. 228). Kanter speaks to that very idea:

> . . . to create a network of supporters out of individual clout requires that a person pass on and share power, that subordinates and peers be empowered by virtue of their connection with that person.

> Traditionally, neither men nor women have seen women as capable of sponsoring others, even though they may be capable of achieving and succeeding on their own. Women have been viewed as recipients of sponsorship rather than as the sponsors themselves. (1979, p. 69)

Kanter goes on to suggest, ". . . as more women prove themselves in organizations and think more consciously about bringing young people, this situation will change" (1979, p. 69). Others are thinking along the same lines. "The mentor route is a two-way street, and the sooner women at all levels understand this, the further it can take them" (Mentors for women . . . , 1980, p. 6). Yet another woman offers support for the idea: "Watching the growth of a junior person is an extremely satisfying experience. To see someone bloom and live up to her potential and know you had a part in that is reward in itself" (DeRiemer, 1980, p. 42).

Finally, Christine Hay suggests: "What perhaps may be needed is more encouragement of successful women to take on the role of a model for younger, aspiring women to follow on the job" (1980, p. 35).

CONCLUSION

The fact remains, however, that there just are not enough successful working women. Warihay may be right when she suggests taking support where one can find it. The shortage of women in role model positions alone should discourage relying solely on them for support, connections, and enlightenment as to the mysterious ways of corporate politics. It would not be smart politics to eliminate more than half the potential (successful) resources merely because they are men.

Success for young women in management in the near future will not suddenly be easy. There will be men who do not understand women's problems and other men who unconsciously close out women by virtue of traditional patterns of behavior. Some other men may be afraid to take the social risk of close association with women. Some women will be resentful of another woman's progress or afraid of the competition.

A woman intent on moving up within an organization today needs the best help available, be it a female role model, a pertinent training seminar, a male godfather figure, or a newly emerged wo-mentor--or all four, if she can find them.

And then she needs to make a personal commitment so that, if and when she becomes successful, she, like Minerva ages ago, will pass on her knowledge and experience as a wo-mentor to succeeding generations.

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